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ABSTRACT

A brief phenomenology of meaning and values must be addressed by any theory of adult learning and by any theory of lifelong learning. These phenomena are characterized essentially by process, change, and alteration. However, these processes, changes, and alterations are not linear, modular, or determinable and predictable. These phenomena are transformations in meaningfulness and valuation that are central and pivotal to those vital perspectives sometimes called "second chance" opportunities for adult learners. These opportunities are frequently viewed as crises; however, the phenomena of transformations of meaningfulness and valuation must be interpreted in a vastly different way when they are examined through a postmodern perspective. Postmodernism articulates noncausal reasoning and argument, distinguishes between originations and beginnings, and claims that although it might be possible to trace out originations, it is not possible to establish firm, absolute, and causal-foundational beginnings. There are many postmodern strains in adult education, including: (1) the problem of defining adult education; (2) the problem of whether adult education is a discipline; (3) the problem of explanation versus understanding; (4) the definition of "person"; and (5) the problem of foundationalism. The presentation of adult education as postmodern adult education is a thought experiment, a research project in the mode of abductive reasoning. Can this method of presentation help educators to see adult education with new meaning, as transformative and empowering? (KC)

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Lifelong Learning: A Phenomenology of Meaning and Value Transformation in Postmodern Adult Education

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Introductory Remarks

This paper offers a brief phenomenology of meaning and values which must be addressed by any theory of adult learning and by any theory of lifelong learning. These phenomena are constituted most essentially by process, change, alteration. But these processes, changes, and alterations are not linear, modular, or determinable and predictable. These phenomena are transformations in meaningfulness and valuation which are central and pivotal to those vital, rededicative perspectives which sometimes are called "second chance" opportunities for adult learners.

These opportunities are frequently viewed as crises or crisislike moments necessitating choices between periods of relative stability. However, the phenomena of transformations of meaningfulness and valuation must be interpreted in a vastly different way when these are intuited through a **postmodern** perspective.

What I have laid out for us this morning is surely a tall order for a brief presentation. But perhaps enough can be discussed at this time for each of us to refashion relevantizing, vitalizing, transformative, and rededicational ways whereby we can move through further reflective stages in our own lifelong learning as professionals. This recreating of our **person** is the core of the professional life of a person.

I shall move through the main points of this presentation in reverse order. Doing this will allow us to reflect together on the term, the concept, and the phenomena referred to as **postmodern** and **postmodernism** and thereby clarify them in the very beginning.

Postmodernism

The term **postmodernism** has come into widespread use in literature, literary criticism, art, music, architecture, history, and philosophy, among many other areas of human creativity, invention, and discovery. It has become a familiar term and concept in human science approaches to anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology, and in many other social sciences. Some new ways of viewing physics, chemistry, and biology have sometimes been termed **postmodern.**

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It is not difficult to cite a number of the most central figures in this conceptual upheaval: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend, among so many others. In this brief listing I have included only philosophers who increasingly have become major sources of new conceptualizations for adult educators most interested in theory construction and in research models.

In all of these disciplines and fields of expression cited, and in the writings of each and every one of the persons named, **postmodernism refers to the process of undercutting any and all absolute and certain starting points, any and all firm foundations for establishing meaning and for interpreting values. Postmodernism is a term which refers to a lifeworld, or lived world, in which persons through their literature, art, music, philosophy, and sciences call into serious question all claims to any absolute and certain value and truth which previously had been perceived, and conceived, to emerge from meaning based on absolutely firm foundations.** The foundationalism provided in the modernism of Rene Descartes, himself the "father" of modern Western philosophy, for example, may have run its course.

Postmodernism artriculates non-causal reasoning and argument, distinguishes between originations and beginnings, and claims that although it might be possible to trace out originations, it is not possible to establish firm, absolute, and causal-foundational beginnings. For example, Gerald Graff claims that

> In its exclusively literary sense, postmodernism may be defined as that movement within contemporary literature and criticism which calls into question the claims of literature and art to truth and human value. As Richard Poirier has observed, 'contemporary literature has come to register the dissolution of the ideas often evoked to justify its existence: the cultural, moral, psychological premises that for many people still define the essence of literature as a humanistic enterprise. Literature is now in the process of telling us how little it means. (Graff, 1984, p. 38)

The critical mass of personal and cultural phenomena referred to as **postmodern** and **postmodernism** did not suddenly begin; it did not beguile a modern world absolutely pristine in its foundational innocence. These phenomena have been structured through many sources, even as far back as the earliest "romanticism and the rise of romantic alienation and despair" (Graff, 1984, p. 39). It is rarely possible to experience the actual beginning of an intellectual and spiritual upheaval, or fully to understand originations and beginning as they take their places in our lives. This is as true of an individual person's life as it is of the life of a culture. In fact, separating strains of originations from actual beginnings is

the historian's central work. This is the task of intellectual and social history.

R. G. Collingwood, as philosopher of history and historiographer, called this key focus of history the essence of metaphysical thinking. In doing so, he described what could be characterized as **postmodern** metaphysics. "People are not ordinarily aware of their absolute presuppositions" he said,

> and are not, therefore, thus aware of changes in them; such a change, therefore, cannot be a matter of choice. Nor is there anything superficial or frivolous about it. It is the most radical change a [person] can undergo, and entails the abandonment of all of [this person's] most firmly established habits and standards for thought and action.
>
> Why, asks my friend, do such changes happen? Briefly, because the absolute presuppositions of any given society, at any given phase of its history, form a structure which is subject to 'strains' of greater or less intensity, which are 'taken up' in various ways, but never annihilated. If the strains are too great, the structure collapses and is replaced by another, which will be a modification of the old with the destructive strain removed; a modification not consciously devised but created by a process of unconscious thought. (Collingwood, 1940, p. 48)

But we must go back to "modernism" for a moment. The "modern" authors, for example, included Reiner Maria Rilke, James Joyce, Paul Valery, W. B Yeats, Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, and William Faulkner, among many other "greats." These authors seemed to be deliberately creating, or attempting to create, values "in an inherently valueless world" (Graff, 1984, p. 39). We should remember that this "valueless world" was constructed in the earliest decades of the 20th century in large part by the mechanistic materialists and the logical positivists with their passionate, value-laden, and fixated beliefs in the materialistic and logical foundation of the (valueless) world.

We should not forget that much of adult education research (specifically of the hypothetical-deductive, bahavioristic, neobehavioristic, and statistical varieties) over the past four decades or so has been very much gounded in the earlier foundationalism of the logical positivists. And modernist adult education is adult education which takes place within a world still perceived as a world in which foundations for it all will be found... in principle... sometime...

In the face of this foundationalism of materialism and logical positivism, the beliefs of the modernists (in literature and in literary criticism, for example) in" the constitutive power of the

> imagination which supported romantic and modernist writers, their confidence in the order and meaning repeated in high

> cultural tradition as a means of rescuing themselves from the fragmentation of a mass, industrialized society, appeared suddenly to have run its course by the mid-fifties. Since then, art and literature have increasingly incorporated a sense of irony and skepticism toward art's traditional pretensions to truth, high seriousness, and the profundity of meaning. (Graff, 1984, p. 39).

Postmodern Adult Education

A distinction must be made between (1) **postmodern adult education**, (2) adult education in a **postmodern world**, and (3) a **postmodern definition** of adult education. My emphasis in this discussion is primarily on the first of these distinctions, **postmodern adult education.**

Two attitudes within the creations, inventions, and discoveries of **postmodernism** which are of great importance to adult education include the apocalyptic attitude and the visionary attitude (Graff, 1984, p. 38. The apocalyptic attitude expresses itself through the theme of the domination of the death of literature, with criticism in the arts acknowledging the futility of its own enterprise. There is no greater realization in all of adult education thinking than the realization of the utter futility of our enterprise "in staying our present course" in the face of catastrophic global misery and need. Each and every one of us clearly intuits this maximizing sense of failure any time and every time we meditatively attend-to our tasks as adult educators.

The visionary attitude expresses itself as "hopefulness for revolutionary changes in society through radical transformations in human consciousness" (Graff, 1984, p. 38). It seems clear enough that the adult education conceptual emphases on empowerment and transformation are derivable from these two all-pervasive traditions within **postmodern** thought. Hence, empowerment and transformation are clearly **postmodern** themes of great motivating force and power in adult education theory, practice, and research. But why do so many adult educators argue against the presence in persons, groups, and cultures of, and the motive power of, the clearly identifiable phenomena of empowerment and transformation?

A paradigm case of **postmodern adult education**, it seems to me, has been the work of Paulo Freire. I have argued elsewhere (Stanage, 1989) that the essence of Freire's most seminal theories, research, and practices articulating the transformation, empowerment, and liberation of the **person** of all persons clearly manifests originating influences from **postmodernist** sources. These sources include Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's hermeneutics, the existentialism of Jaspers and Sartre, and the unique concepts of Mounier's personalism and the liberation theology of Third World expressions of Roman Catholicism.

Although it is probably impossible to establish a beginning of **postmodern adult education**, if one were to try to fix such a beginning, Paulo Freire and his praxis (reflection and action) would emerge as a prime candidate marking such a beginning. In fact, viewing Freire's praxis as a clear and distinct watershed between modern adult education and **postmodern adult education** would go a long way toward helping us all to understand and to appreciate his work much more thoroughly. It might even be possible then to apply it to the transformation, empowerment, and thus to the liberation, of persons anywhere in the world who are caught in phenomenologically unique webbings and spiralings of hegemonic forces. And, truthfully speaking, who among us completely escapes these hegemonic forces?

There are many more **postmodern** strains in adult education. In the time available I can only point briefly to some of the most important ones. These strains relate to the ways in which we are committed to dealing with a number of very familiar problems:

(1) The problem of defining adult education. It is not simply the case that adult education is difficult to define, or that very bad definitions traditionally have been constructed. In contemporary adult education, more and more persons have simply given up the task of trying to define the key terms "adult" and "adult education." They have walked away from this seminal task.

(2) The problem of whether adult education is a discipline. Adult education in higher education contexts normally is treated as if it were a discipline, but clearly the phenomena supposedly constituting adult education as a discipline are not circumscribed as a distinct branch of knowledge or instruction. And adult educators have walked away from this cluster of problems as well.

(3) The problem of explanation versus understanding. This is perhaps the central issue for Critical Theory Adult Education. Critical theorists make explicit use of many of the most important **postmodern** figures and their theories and concepts in their approaches to adult education.

(4) What is a person?. The mere enumeration and description of contradictory models of what a person is in the context of adult education theory, practice, and research raises countless questions about how anyone is to approach the phenomena constituting adult education.

(5) The problem of foundationalism in adult education. This is the problem of adult education trying to provide -- from within itself -- a firm foundation for all of its work, or trying to ground it firmly within the context of an interdisciplinary matrix of the more traditional arts and sciences. Notoriously, adult educators borrow their theories, concepts and research programs from more established arts and sciences. There is nothing wrong with this borrowing, except when those theories, concepts, and research

programs are grabbed at in non-reflective, haphazard, helter-skelter ways, such that their faddish and fashionable acceptance for a short time constitutes their only legitimacy and justification.

In other places I have argued that adult education can become the most rigorous of the human sciences (see Stanage, 1987, passim). An adult educator who does not see immediately the obvious relevancy of this claim might well still be committed to the fixated belief that the only kinds and degrees of science, scientific method, rigor, and precision are still those of the old logical positivism. But this habituated fixation to long-outmoded ways of professional work is definitively contradicted by the everyday world of work of practicing scientists (although not by teachers of science or "school approaches" to "scientific method") who have discarded the foundationalism and versions of absolute certitudes, exact meaning, and value-free sciences.

I know of no other kind of inquiries and practices (**praxis**) in which the subjects of the **praxis** are both the theorizers and those who are theorized about; are all themselves practitioners; and who are both researcher and the researched. In this special context of relevancy science and its rigor are not dictated by the exactness and sterility of logical positivism. Science (**scientia**) is any rigorous and systematic investigation of a determinate subject-matter.

The subject-matter of adult education is the adult eductions of **person** (Stanage, 1987, passim). The rigorousness is the strict, undeviating, attending-to each and every one of the actual and possibilized adult eductions of **person**. The rigorousness is the thoroughly committed and scrupulous investigation of each and every possible adult eduction of **person**. This is the proper sense of "rigor" in scientific inquiry.

In this case, although it is not possible to separate theory, practice, and research in adult education, they must be distinguished for purposes of special phenomenological investigation. What I have just said itself constitutes an important claim in **postmodern adult education**. But even if someone asserts that this sort of thing is often done in other areas of human inquiry (in anthropology and sociology, for example), this assertion itself further supports my claim that we are now dealing with a **postmodern adult education**, since possible examples closest to what I am offering are the contemporary human sciences (in this case, the "social sciences" more humanized) which have been most influenced by **postmodern praxis**.

There are many more problems within adult education, as I have said, which articulate distinct **postmodern** strains. These include the ubiquitous and very familiar problems of: hegemonic professionalization and institutionalization; the hegemonic cooption of the young members of the profession who constitute the principal human resource as carriers of meaning and values within adult eduction; the proliferation of professional jargon (and with this

the much-needed deconstruction of the text of this jargon); and the veritable flight from thinking so common in adult education contexts. Perhaps it is not so much a flight from thinking as it is the failure to make time available for reflection within the midst of the typical practitioner's everyday world of work.

Concluding Remarks

I now move back to the very beginning of this paper, and ask (in the **postmodern** vein) the question of whether the concepts of meaning and value have life today. If they do, their lives are surely different than they were, say, before the first world war, or perhaps the first four decades of this century. That was a period when most disciplines were still building upon firm foundations, still reaching out from their commitments to exactitudes of meaning, from the bases of their hopes and expectations of certitude; a period during which inevitable and completely unimpeded progress was the industrialized Western world's most important product and exportation.

But now, in this late period of the twentieth century, in the words of Jean-Francois Lyotard,

> **Postmodern** science [my emphasis] -- by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta,' catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes -- is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable. It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximized performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy. [Note: "Paralogy" is the term Lyotard uses to refer to "the return of narrative in discourses of legitimation. Examples are: the study of open systems, local determinism, antimethod... ." In this same passage Lyotard cites P. B. Medawar as claiming that 'having ideas is the scientist's highest accomplishment...' and that there is no 'scientific method' (Lyotard, 1979, 1984, pp. 60 f). Shades of Charles Sanders Peirce's **abductive inference**! But Peirce offered this idea to the world more than one hundred years earlier!].

And our own John Ohliger, in reminding us that "wisdom is as hard to hold onto as a friendly butterfly but as basic to a good life as nutrition," once again demonstrates his own great, and always relevant, wisdom in reminding us that: the information revolution may be an illusion since only certain kinds of knowledgable specialists may be able to access it; "public nformation when packaged in a computer is no longer public" because of a recent Supreme Court decision; biological information is lost foreover with the extinction of species at the rate of 1,000 per year; and "the loss of cultural information due to the de-population of our rural areas is far greater that all the information accumulated by science and technology in the same period" (Ohlinger, 1989).

All of this is surely the stuff and substance of **postmodern adult education.** In the light of the needs of persons existing within a lifeworld (**lebenswelt**) rapidly becoming the product of **postmodern** creations, inventions, and discoveries, adult education necessarily must -- in fact will -- view itself quite differently than it did, say, before the Freirean revolution. For example, change will not be viewed as a period of crisis, upheaval, or mere transition between stable periods, with homeostasis, stability, and quietness being the "natural" and preferred states of existence of persons with whom adult educators might generally work. Instead, transformations, empowerment, and struggles against each and every degree and kind of hegemonic force will be among the essential structures of **person**, and in turn the lifeblood of adult education.

Thus it is that I claim that the phenomena constituting meaning and values are always processive and never static. Any reflection on them necessarily reveals them to be transformative and empowering of the **person** of persons. They are central and pivotal to vital, rededicative perspectives within lifelong education. They too articulate the lifeblood of adult education. Performing a phenomenological investigation of these phenomena is simply the clearest and most direct way of digging through modernist approaches to these archaeological insights.

When these phenomena are viewed from the perspectives of **postmodern adult education**, however, a quite new theory of adult learning emerges: Learning is the process of fusing the relevantized, antecedently present, meaningfulness of the lifeworld of one's own adult eductions of **person** as feeling(s), experiencing(s), and/or consciousing(s) with new meaning(s) and with new possibilization(s) of the world, of oneself, and of the sense of one's own adult eductions of person within the world.

A theory of adult learning consistent with this definition would have to offer a clear account of all of the key notions in the definition (of which there are many, and all are laid out in Stanage, 1987, passism). When this is done the account could be turned around, and one could then say that the the definition flows from the theory itself.

The contents of both of these points are the products of what Charles Sanders Peirce, as phenomenologist, (1839-1914, and as the founder of pragmatism, the only truly indigenous American movement in philosophy) called **abductive thinking.** He claimed that **abductive thinking** is quite different from inductive and deductive thinking. More importantly, Peirce claimed that **abductive thinking** was much more important than either of them since it is only through **abductive thinking** that the most seminal and crucial hunches, ideas, and hypotheses can emerge.

Finally, you can now see how it is that my presentation of adult education as **postmodern adult education** is a thought experiment, a

research project in the mode of **abductive reasoning.** Has it helped you, in your own self-reflections to see adult education with new eyes, with new meaning and new values, as transformative and empowering?

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